1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER ONE

THE LEPCHAS AND SIKKIM

i

THE Lepchas[1] are a Mongoloid people living in the Himalayas on the southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kinchenjunga. It seems certain that they were originally the only inhabitants of this large tract of mountainous land, but during the last three centuries, or possibly longer, their land has been taken from them by conquering invaders, the Tibetans, the Nepali, and finally the English. At the time of the 1931 census the 25,780 registered Lepchas were almost evenly divided between the Native State of Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of British India, 13,000 being in Sikkim and the rest in Darjeeling, with the exception of 66 who were employed, chiefly as gardeners, in Calcutta.

There is no generally accepted theory among those anthropologists who believe that every tribe originally came from somewhere else as to the place of origin of the Lepchas. Various parts of Tibet and Mongolia have been suggested and a certain similarity has apparently been found between the Lepcha language and some dialect spoken in Indo-China. The Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration and place the home of their ancestors—the people of Mayel—in one of the inaccessible valleys of Kinchenjunga.

The Lepchas do not appear ever to have resisted invasion of their own accord. Sikkim was apparently colonised by the Tibetans at some date prior to the beginning of the seventeenth century,[2]

[1] The Lepchas do not call themselves Lepchas; they call themselves *Rong*. 'Lepcha' is said to be a derogatory Nepali term—*lap-che*—meaning, though the philology is doubtful, 'nonsense talkers.' A parallel could be found in the Russian name for Germans—*nemetski*, which means 'the dumb ones.' Since all books dealing with the people and district refer to the Lepchas as Lepchas, it would seem merely pedantic and confusing to use the term *Rong*. The word Lepcha would appear to have no other significance in Lepcha.

[2] I take the suggestion that Sikkim (which at that date included the present Darjeeling district) was colonised or at least dominated by the Tibetans before the beginning of the seventeenth century from *An Account of Tibet* by the

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

114 travel in the interior of the country. As an ethnologist I bitterly regretted this decision: but as a friend of the country I fully sympathised with His Highness's orders. If the policy of excluding strangers from Nepal is ever changed (which seems unlikely), I hope that I may be one of the first to benefit from it: but for the present no one who has seen the disastrous results of the contact of Western civilisation with some of the more primitive peoples of India can doubt the wisdom of Nepal's rulers.

In the meantime I was forced to consider other alternatives. It had always been my intention eventually to spend some time among the people of the Tibetan border. There are many Nepalese settlers in Sikkim, and I hoped, after seeing the people in their own country, to find out how they adjusted their lives when they came in contact with another culture. Also, there were the Lepchas, a shy and retiring people, said to be rapidly dying out, who claim to be the original inhabitants of the country. While I was still in Nepal I discussed plans with the British Minister, Colonel Bailey (some of whose earlier wanderings resulted in the first discovery of the blue poppy, *Meconopsis Baileyii*, which now thrives even in Hyde Park). He had been for many years Political Officer in Sikkim and knew the country intimately. It was from him that I first heard of the Talung Valley. Although he had not himself visited it he told me that it was the one purely Lepcha place still in existence. In all other
[144 parts of Sikkim the people had intermarried with Tibetans
177 and Nepalis to such an extent that they had lost all traces of
619] tribal consciousness. Not so, however, in the Talung; for this valley formed part of the Maharaja's personal estate and none but Lepchas were permitted to own land or to settle in it.

114 On our return from Everest I talked the matter over with
609 the Maharaja. His Highness said he had no objection to my spending some months in the valley; but warned me that it might be difficult to get on speaking terms with the people, who had the reputation of being extremely shy and of

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

671 that he will not commit such a crime again. Part of the fine
682 can be given towards the funeral expenses of the deceased."

Ordeal by oil.

671 "The oil must be supplied by the Government and must
695 be of the finest quality. It is boiled in a pan at least three inches deep. In the oil a black stone and a white stone are placed, of equal size and weight. He who has taken the oath must first wash his hands in water, in milk, and in widow's urine. His hand is then bound in a cloth and sealed. This is done a day or two before the ordeal, in order to give him a chance of confessing. The vessel with the boiling oil is then placed so that the stones cannot be seen, and he has to take one out. If he takes out the white one without any burn he wins his case. He who gets the black stone is sure to be burnt, and loses his case. Should he who gets the white stone be slightly burnt, it means that he has partially spoken the truth, and wins half his case."

Concerning adultery.

671 "For violating a woman of different position 3 oz. of gold
684 have to be paid to the woman's relations, and 4 gold srang to Government, besides many things in kind.

"For violation of a woman of the same position as the man 2 or 3 gold srang and several articles in kind must be paid.

"If the woman goes of her own accord to the man he has only to pay 1 gold srang and three kinds of articles.

"Should one man's wife entice another married man to go with her, she has to pay seven kinds of things in kind.

"Should a man and a woman cohabit on a journey there is no fine."

Concerning the Lepchas.

114 "The Lepcha is the aboriginal inhabitant of Sikkim, and the prominent character in Darjeeling, where he undertakes all sorts of outdoor employment. The race to which he belongs is a very singular one; markedly Mongolian in

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

atures, and a good deal too, by imitation, in habit; still 144
e differs from his Tibetan prototype, though not so decidedly
; from the Nepalese and Bhutanese, between whom he is
emmed into a narrow tract of mountain country, barely
xty miles in breadth.

"An attentive examination of the Lepcha in one respect 157
ntirely contradicts our preconceived notions of a moun-
ineer, as he is timid, peaceful and no brawler; qualities
hich are all the more remarkable from contrasting so
rongly with those of his neighbours to the east and west:
f whom the Gurkhas are brave and warlike to a proverb,
nd the Bhutanese quarrelsome, cowardly, and cruel (this
tatement is altogether unfair to the latter and in no way
ue). A group of Lepchas is exceedingly picturesque. They 142
re of short stature—four feet eight inches to five feet; rather
road in the chest, and with muscular arms, but small hands
nd slender wrists. The face is broad, flat, and of eminently
artar character, flat-nosed, oblique-eyed, with no beard,
nd a little moustache. The lower limbs are powerfully
eveloped, befitting genuine mountaineers: the feet are
nall. Though never really handsome, and very womanish
n the cast of countenance, they have invariably a mild,
ank, and even engaging expression, which I have in vain
ought to analyse, and which is perhaps due more to the
bsence of anything unpleasing than to the presence of
irect grace or beauty. . . . Indolence, when left to them- 157
lves, is their besetting sin; they detest any fixed employ- 515
ent, and their foulness of person and garments renders
em disagreeable inmates: in this rainy climate they are
upportable out of doors. . . . In disposition they are 157
miable and obliging, frank, humorous, and polite, without
he servility of the Hindoos; and their address is free and
nconstrained. Their intercourse with one another and with [576]
uropeans is scrupulously honest; a present is divided
qually amongst many, without a syllable of discontent or
rudging look or word: each, on receiving his share, coming
p and giving the donor a brusque bow and thanks. They 000

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER 3

A Strange Mixture of Fact and Fiction: being a Brief History of Sikkim

161 SIKKIM has a population of close on 110,000, of whom 25,780 are said to be Lepchas of one sort or another; but this figure does not distinguish the very large number of men who have intermarried with women of other tribes and whose offspring are accordingly no longer to be reckoned as pure Lepchas. There are no accurate figures available of the total pure Lepcha population of Sikkim, but I imagine it to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of 13,000. What can be said, however, without fear of contradiction, is that this number is steadily decreasing year by year. The reasons for this are at present not clear to me; but I believe the principal cause to be contact of the easy-going and extremely non-materialistic Lepchas with the excessively virile, more thrifty and individualistic Gurkhas. The latter, finding insufficient land in their own country, are ever seeking for fresh places in which to settle; and during the process the Lepchas have been to a great extent absorbed or at least driven further and further into the hills. The settlement of Gurkhas and others in Sikkim is now controlled; but the Lepchas have already decreased to such an extent that legislation can now do no more than retard their complete extinction, that is, as a separate tribe, for a few years longer. They claim to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim. They are of Mongoloid appearance and speak a language which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group.

173 The early history of Sikkim is mainly based on Lepcha oral tradition, but the reigning family seems to have been from the first Tibetan. The Tibetan form of Buddhism, generally known as Lamaism, is believed to have been

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

Before proceeding to narrate my different expeditions into
Sikkim and Nepal from Dorjiling, I shall give a sketch of the different peoples and races composing the heterogeneous population of Sikkim and the neighbouring mountains.

The Lepcha is the aboriginal inhabitant of Sikkim, and the prominent character in Dorjiling, where he undertakes all sorts of out-door employment. The race to which he belongs is a very singular one; markedly Mongolian in features, and a good deal too, by imitation, in habit; still he differs from his Tibetan prototype, though not so decidedly as from the Nepalese and Bhotanese, between whom he is hemmed into a narrow tract of mountain country, barely 60 miles in breadth. The Lepchas possess a tradition of the flood, during which a couple escaped to the top of a mountain (Tendong) near Dorjiling. The earliest traditions which they have of their history date no further back than some three hundred years, when they describe themselves as having been long-haired, half-clad savages. At about that period they were visited by Tibetans, who introduced Boodh worship, the platting of their hair into pig-tails, and very many of their own customs. Their physiognomy is however so Tibetan in its character, that it cannot be supposed that this was their earliest intercourse with the trans-nivean races: whether they may have wandered from beyond the snows before the spread of Boodhism and its civilisation, or whether they are a cross between the Tamulian of India and the Tibetan, has not been decided. Their language, though radically identical with Tibetan, differs from it in many important particulars. They, or at least some of their tribes, call themselves Rong, and Arratt, and their country Dijong: they once possessed a great part of East Nepal, as far west as the Tambur river, and at a still earlier period they penetrated as far west as the Arun river.

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

generous disposition, keep the wallet of the Bijooa always full.

Such are some of the prominent features of this people, who inhabit the sub-Himalayas, between the Nepalese and Bhotan frontiers, at elevations of 3000 to 6000 feet. In their relations with us, they are conspicuous for their honesty, their power as carriers and mountaineers, and their skill as woodsmen; for they build a waterproof house with a thatch of banana leaves in the lower, or of bamboo in the elevated regions, and equip it with a table and bedsteads for three persons, in an hour, using no implement but their heavy knife. Kindness and good humour soon attach them to your person and service. A gloomy-tempered or morose master they avoid, an unkind one they flee. If they serve a good hills-man like themselves, they will follow him with alacrity, sleep on the cold, bleak mountain exposed to the pitiless rain, without a murmur, lay down the heavy burden to carry their master over a stream, or give him a helping hand up a rock or precipice—do anything, in short, but encounter a foe, for I believe the Lepcha to be a veritable coward.* It is well, perhaps, he is so: for if a race, numerically so weak, were to embroil itself by resenting the injuries of the warlike Ghorkas, or dark Bhotanese, the folly would soon lead to destruction.

Before leaving the Lepchas, it may be worth mentioning that the northern parts of the country, towards the Tibet frontier, are inhabited by Sikkim Bhoteeas † (or Kumpas),

* Yet, during the Ghorka war, they displayed many instances of courage: when so hard pressed, however, that there was little choice of evils.

† Bhote is the general name for Tibet (not Bhotan), and Kumpa is a large province, or district, in that country. The Bhotanese, natives of Bhotan, or of the Dhurma country, are called Dhurma people, in allusion to their spiritual chief, the Dhurma Rajah. They are a darker and more powerful race, rude, turbulent, and Tibetan in language and religion, with the worst features of those people exaggerated. The various races of Nepal are too numerous to be alluded

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

a mixed race calling themselves Kumpa Rong, or Kumpa Lepchas; but they are emigrants from Tibet, having come with the first rajah of Sikkim. These people are more turbulent and bolder than the Lepchas, and retain much of their Tibetan character, and even of that of the very province from which they came; which is north-east of Lhassa, and inhabited by robbers. All the accounts I have received of it agree with those given by MM. Huc and Gabet.

Next to the Lepchas, the most numerous tribe in Sikkim is that of the Limboos (called "Chung" by the Lepchas); they abound also in East Nepal, which they once ruled, inhabiting elevations from 2000 feet to 5000 feet. They are Boodhists, and though not divided into castes, belong to several tribes. All consider themselves as the earliest inhabitants of the Tambur Valley, though they have a tradition of having originally emigrated from Tibet, which their Tartar countenance confirms. They are more slender and sinewy than the Lepchas, and neither plait their hair nor wear ornaments; instead of the ban they use the Nepal curved knife, called "cookree," while for the striped kirtle of the Lepcha are substituted loose cotton trousers and a tight jacket; a sash is worn round the middle, and on the head a small cotton cap. When they ruled over East Nepal, their system was feudal; and on their uniting against the Nepalese, they were with difficulty dislodged from their strongholds. They are said to be equally brave and cruel in battle, putting the old and weak to the sword,

to here: they are all described in various papers by Mr. Hodgson, in the "Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal." The Dhurma people are numerous at Dorjiling; they are often runaways, but invariably prove more industrious settlers than the Lepchas. In the Himalaya the name Bhotan is unknown amongst the Tibetans; it signifies literally (according to Mr. Hodgson) the end of Bhote, or Tibet, being the eastern extreme of that country. The Lepchas designate Bhotan as Ayeu, or Aieu, as do often the Bhotanese themselves. Sikkim, again, is called Lhop, or Lho', by the Lepchas and Bhotanese.

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

In the anthropology of the Rong, a two-fold classification is shown : a Mongoloid and a non-Mongoloid element. Our investigation has shown us this two-fold element in the religion and the economy of the Lepchas. From an anthropological standpoint we would like to draw a line of difference between the hunters and the farmers, thus forming two typical groups. The hunters with their hunting religion, sociology and economy represent the tall Rong type and are characterised by the larger physical build, the long small face, the open eye and the long small high nose. The farmers, on the other hand constitute the second group with shorter physiques, broad faces, broad nose, Mongolian eyefold, and prominent cheek bones.

Thus we see that the Rong bear evidences of a mixed culture, and this helps to solve many contradictions concerning them. Some believe that they have connections with the Tibetans. Others say that they wandered from the east along the Burma-Assam mountains. Our own belief is that the hunting component of the Rong are the primitive indigenous inhabitants of the forests of Sikkim. The farmers came from the east and have connections with such people as the Naga, the Lolo and the Miau.

The Rong language belongs to the pure group, that is to say, to the pronounless Himalayan group of the Tibeto-Burman languages. This bears out the facts that they experienced no Austro-Asiatic influence in the language as the Limbu did. Consequently the Austro-Asiatics cannot be held responsible for the non-Mongoloid element among the Lepchas. The only possibility is that among the pure Tibeto-Burmans and in a wider sense among the Tibeto-Chinese, there is an element purely non-Mongoloid and another that is Mongoloid. The study of the Rong therefore throws light on the Mongoloid problem and shows a formation of the Mongoloids within the Tibeto-Chinese Family (Tibeto-Burman is the large sub-group of this family of languages) and, in a very marked manner, among the farming peoples. This is in perfect agreement with the results of our research in Tibet. I found that the Tibetan Mongoloids are represented among the farming population. The cattle breeding nomads have very few Mongoloid features or none at all. Hence it is that

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

in Tibet also, the Mongoloids are farmers. In the regions of North-West China, in Tsing-hai and Kan-su, we found that in many Chinese, living there, the Mongoloid element was completely lacking or present in a very negligible manner. These people are also of a larger build ; they have the long, high-bridged noses, the long narrow faces and in many cases the Mongolian fold is not to be found. One might object that this was due to the influence of non-Mongoloid peoples like the Tibetans and the Turks who repeatedly overran these districts and ruled over the people for long periods of time. We shall refer later to the Mongoloids in China. At this stage it can be said that in China, the pure Mongoloids came from the farming inhabitants in Eastern and Central China as we have proved in the first chapter. One cannot quote the Mongols as counter evidence, as they are a very mixed and younger culture with strong agricultural influences.

We shall not deal in a detailed manner with the customs and habits of the Lepchas at birth, betrothal, marriage, death and burial. There is only one more point which I should like to touch upon : the judging of the Lepchas through the descriptions of European authors like Gorer and C.J. Morris. The two authors describe these people as being dominated by a strong, a very strong, sex complex. J. H. Hutton remarks in his foreword to Gorer's book, "Another aspect of Lepcha life which is almost as striking as the absence of aggression, is the apparent obsession of the whole community with sex. I was tempted to suppose that the author of this book had overemphasised the Lepchas' attitude to sex through an unconscious dramatisation, a journalistic dramatisation, if I may call it so, of a want of reticence on sexual matters of all kinds in a degree quite unfamiliar in his own society. The perusal, however, of Mr. Morris's book shows that I did Mr. Gorer an injustice. At the same time I am rather inclined to feel that the apparent preoccupation of the Lepchas with sex does not necessarily imply that the importance attached to it by them in their lives is proportionately theatrical. One is inclined to wonder whether this consciousness of sex is the cause or the result of the Lepchas' declining population, a decline of which the Lepchas are acutely aware. Probably, if there is any such connection at all it is by now a vicious